

FROM EXILE TO POWER: CAN REZA PAHLAVI UNITE A BROKEN NATION?

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ABSTRACT

This study, *From Exile to Power: Can Reza Pahlavi Unite a Broken Nation?*, examines the political potential of Reza Pahlavi, the exiled Crown Prince of Iran, as a unifying figure in the post-Islamic Republic era. The research situates Pahlavi within the historical context of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). It contrasts the modernization achievements of that period with the authoritarianism, corruption, and socio-political decline that followed the 1979 Islamic Revolution. By employing a qualitative methodology, the paper draws upon historical narratives, discourse analysis of the crown prince's public statements and media presence, and comparative case studies of other exiled leaders who sought to reclaim political legitimacy. The study also evaluates the current political climate inside Iran—marked by fragmented opposition movements, widespread public dissent, and the paradox of international sanctions—and assesses how these dynamics influence the potential role of the crown prince as a symbolic and practical leader. The findings suggest that while challenges such as factionalism within the opposition and scepticism among Iranians remain, the crown prince's combination of historical legitimacy, diaspora influence, and advocacy for secular democratic governance uniquely positions him as a potential unifying figure. The article concludes by presenting possible scenarios for Iran's political future, ranging from a best-case restoration of stability under a constitutional monarchy to continued stagnation under clerical rule.

Keywords: Reza Pahlavi, Pahlavi dynasty, exile politics, Iranian opposition, qualitative analysis, regime change, constitutional monarchy

1. INTRODUCTION

Can Reza Pahlavi unite a broken nation? The silhouette of the former Crown Prince, captured in a video by Vijay Shankar and edited by Kishore Mohan, symbolizes the question he has often faced and long sought to answer. Reza Pahlavi, Crown Prince of Iran, indeed stands alone. He is the sole individual in Iran who carries the legacy, heritage, symbolism, and memory of the Persian monarchy. Moreover, he remains the only unifying figure around whom a majority of Iranians can rally during moments of upheaval, as the world has recently witnessed.

Iran's presidential elections of June 28, 2024, culminating in the victory of Masoud Pezeshkian, offered no glimpse of hope, particularly in light of the crown prince's as-yet-unfulfilled central role. Major opposition movements within Iran continue to lack internal cohesion, while an overwhelming proportion of protesters still yearn for change. Moreover, the implementation of sanctions has created a paradoxical situation for the Iranian people—one that most would prefer to see resolved through a swift regime change. Different factions of the Iranian opposition also seek resolution, though ideally in ways that best serve their political preferences.

The regional context has only intensified these dynamics. The twelve-day war between Iran and Israel fueled expectations among many Iranians that the regime might collapse under external

pressure, particularly as Israeli strikes targeted senior commanders involved in domestic repression. Although regime change did not materialize, the war underscored the regime's vulnerability and deepened widespread frustration. This was compounded by the recent video message of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who directly addressed the Iranian people, urging them to rise against the Islamic Republic. Together, these developments highlight not only the fragility of the current system but also the growing external recognition of the Iranian people's struggle—an environment in which the crown prince's potential role as a unifying national figure has gained renewed visibility.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. The Pahlavi Dynasty

The Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) marked a transformative era in Iran's history, turning the country from a largely semi-feudal society into a modern state within just a few decades. Under Reza Shah and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran underwent rapid industrialization, the construction of modern infrastructure, and sweeping reforms in education and women's rights, including suffrage and expanded access to higher learning. Literacy spread, universities flourished, and cities such as Tehran, Shiraz, and Isfahan became symbols of rapid modernization admired internationally. The clergy initially supported the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, which provided the foundation for economic growth, industrial expansion, and social progress. By the 1970s, Iran's economy ranked among the fastest-growing in Asia, while its international standing positioned it as both a regional leader and a trusted global partner.

2.2 The Islamic Revolution of 1979

However, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 marked a tragic historical wrong turn for Iran. Driven by clerical opportunism, radical extremists, and foreign manipulation, it forced the Shah into exile and replaced him with Ayatollah Khomeini as the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic. The new regime quickly alienated many Iranians at home and abroad, fueled in part by Khomeini's deep-seated hostility toward the United States and the Western world. Despite mass disillusionment, the Islamic Republic endured through the 1990s and early 2000s, surviving waves of anti-government protests spurred by corruption, censorship, injustice, and the profound national dishonour inflicted by its rulers. A notorious prelude to this upheaval was the Cinema Rex fire in Abadan (August 1978), when Islamist militants deliberately set the cinema ablaze, killing more than 400 innocent people. Blaming SAVAK, the Shah's intelligence service, the extremists exploited the tragedy to inflame anti-monarchist sentiment. This calculated act of terror epitomized how deceit and violence were weaponized to dismantle the monarchy.

Post-1979 Iran has been characterized not by progress but by regression—marked by widespread repression, systemic corruption, and declining global status. Despite temporary periods of hope, such as the reformist presidency of Mohammad Khatami, authoritarianism has consistently prevailed. The Iranian people repeatedly demonstrated their discontent:

- 1999 – The Kooy-e Daneshgah (Tehran University dormitory protests) were violently crushed, with students beaten and even thrown from rooftops under the orders of then-commander of the security forces Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, who today serves as the Speaker of Iran's Parliament (Majles).
- 2009 – The Green Movement erupted after disputed elections, met with brutal crackdowns, mass arrests, and killings.

- 2019 – Nationwide protests against fuel price hikes were suppressed with unprecedented bloodshed, with estimates of more than 1,500 people killed in three days, according to international reports.
- 2022 – The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, sparked by the killing of Mahsa Amini, became the most significant uprising since 1979, met once again with mass arrests, executions, and state violence.

Meanwhile, the ruling elite turned international sanctions into a mechanism of enrichment for themselves. The Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and the entourage of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei used front companies and smuggling networks to profit from oil sales, trade monopolies, and currency manipulation. Ordinary Iranians saw no benefits—only worsening poverty, inflation, and unemployment—while a small elite accumulated immense wealth.

Internationally, the Islamic Republic has transformed Iran from a respected regional power into a pariah state. Its support for militant groups, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and militias in Iraq and Syria, as well as its involvement in terrorist operations abroad, has isolated the nation diplomatically. Where once Iran under the Pahlavis was seen as a modernizing force and a trusted ally in international affairs, the post-1979 regime is viewed as a destabilizing actor, feared and mistrusted across the globe.

In sum, while the Pahlavi dynasty laid the foundations for modernization and global engagement, the Islamic Republic has presided over regression, repression, and isolation.

3. REZA PAHLAVI: A PROFILE

3.1 Early Life and Education

Reza Pahlavi was born in 1960 as the eldest son of Mohammad Reza Shah, the last monarch of Iran. From an early age, he was groomed for leadership, receiving a rigorous education in both Iran and abroad. He pursued advanced military training at the U.S. Air Force's Fighter Weapons School, reflecting his intended future role as commander-in-chief of the Iranian armed forces. His formative years combined military discipline, political awareness, and exposure to international diplomacy, preparing him to assume national leadership responsibilities.

3.2 Exile and Activism

The disappearance of his father's regime in 1979 forced Reza Pahlavi and his family into exile. This upheaval was not only the product of domestic unrest but also of international maneuvering. The Shah's assertive control over oil prices, his leadership role in OPEC, and Iran's rapidly modernizing trajectory unsettled Western powers, who feared an Iran growing too independent and regionally dominant. With Iran's military strength and constructive relations with neighboring countries making direct intervention impossible, foreign actors—including President Jimmy Carter in the United States, President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in France, and Prime Minister James Callaghan in the United Kingdom, each in different ways provided political space and indirect support to Ayatollah Khomeini during his exile—most notably through France's decision to host him near Paris and the BBC's extensive broadcasting of his messages into Iran—thereby enabling clerical forces to challenge and ultimately dismantle the monarchy.

Reza Pahlavi settled in the United States, where he transformed exile into a platform for political engagement rather than retreat. For decades, he has consistently spoken on behalf of the Iranian people, advocating for secular democracy, human rights, and national sovereignty. He has built networks within the Iranian diaspora and maintained a strong presence on social media platforms

such as Instagram and Twitter, using them to communicate directly with Iranians inside the country. In this way, he has remained an active voice in opposition politics, connecting with successive waves of Iranian protest movements—from the student uprising of 1999 to the Green Movement of 2009, and the nationwide protests of 2019 to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising of 2022. A vivid example of his continued relevance came during the 2022 'Woman, Life, Freedom' uprising, when the crown prince issued a statement calling for international solidarity with Iranian protesters. Shared widely on Persian social media, his message galvanized both the diaspora and activists inside Iran, highlighting how exile leadership can still resonate with ordinary citizens in moments of national crisis

3.3 Vision for Iran

The crown prince's vision for Iran centers on the establishment of a secular and democratic system that protects individual rights, ensures equality under the law, and restores national dignity. He stresses the need for inclusivity, rejecting the sectarian or elitist attitudes that often divide the opposition. He also highlights the agency of ordinary Iranians, noting their crucial role in mobilizing, coordinating, and documenting resistance through social media and civic action.

In contrast to the Islamic Republic, which has become synonymous with repression, corruption, and international isolation, the crown prince advocates for a political system rooted in freedom, transparency, and global integration. His commitment to modernization does not seek to erase Iran's cultural heritage but rather to safeguard and elevate it, ensuring that national pride coexists with democratic governance. In his public statements, Reza Pahlavi presents himself not as an exiled monarch seeking power, but as a servant of the people, prepared to guide Iran toward unity, stability, and prosperity.

4. CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE IN IRAN

4.1 Key Political Players

The Islamic Republic remains firmly under the control of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, whose authority extends across all pillars of power. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has become a dominant economic and political force, deeply embedded in sectors such as construction, telecommunications, and oil through its network of subsidiaries and trusts. Analysts estimate that the IRGC controls between one-third and two-thirds of Iran's economy, including lucrative smuggling networks worth tens of billions of dollars (United Against Nuclear Iran 2023; Al-Monitor, 2017). A recent Washington Post investigation revealed how the IRGC covertly blocked the planned IPO of Divar, a leading digital platform, due to its founder's outspoken criticism of the regime—demonstrating the Guard's ability to suppress private-sector independence (Fassihi & Dehghanpisheh, 2025). Their reach is further reinforced by privileged access to state assets: an Iran International report shows that the IRGC and institutions tied to Khamenei have been allocated substantial shares of oil export revenues and public funds in the national budget (Iran International, 2024).

Meanwhile, figures such as Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, a former IRGC commander involved in the violent suppression of the 1999 student protests, now serve as Speaker of Parliament—illustrating how loyal insiders are recycled into top state positions (Centre for Human Rights in Iran 2013; NCRI 2021). By contrast, presidents such as Hassan Rouhani and Ebrahim Raisi have wielded limited authority compared to the clerical establishment and the IRGC, a dynamic consistently noted in both policy analyses and major outlets such as The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post (Saeidi, 2021; Fassihi, 2021).

4.2 Role of Social Media

Social media has emerged as a crucial platform for dissent and mobilization. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter (X), and Telegram enable Iranians to bypass state censorship, coordinate protests, and document abuses in real time. Reza Pahlavi leverages these channels to stay in touch with both protesters and the wider diaspora, offering a rallying point for a fragmented opposition.

Meanwhile, the regime attempts to control this digital resistance through tactics like internet blackouts and heightened surveillance—but has not been able to contain the flow of information fully. This decentralized communication framework keeps opposition narratives alive and connected across borders.

4.3 Economic Collapse and Corruption

Ran's economy is profoundly undermined by corruption and the monopolistic dominance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Transparency International consistently ranks Iran among the lowest globally in its Corruption Perceptions Index, highlighting systemic misuse of public resources (Transparency International, 2023). The IRGC controls vast segments of the economy, from no-bid government contracts in oil, construction, and infrastructure to telecommunications, petrochemicals, and automotive industries. Its revenues are estimated at more than \$12 billion annually, primarily through front companies and military-linked conglomerates such as Khatam al-Anbiya, one of Iran's largest engineering contractors (Al-Monitor, 2017; United Against Nuclear Iran, 2023).

The Guard's engineering arm has also been accused of manipulating natural resources, creating what critics describe as a "water mafia" that diverts water to prioritized regions while worsening shortages in provinces such as Khuzestan (Abedin, 2021). Its influence extends even into the private sector: a recent Washington Post investigation revealed that the IRGC covertly blocked the IPO of Divar, one of Iran's largest digital platforms, as retaliation against its outspoken founder—underscoring how the Guard suppresses independent business ventures (Fassihi & Dehghanpisheh, 2025).

A RAND Corporation study, *The Rise of the Pasdaran*, demonstrates how the IRGC leveraged post-war reconstruction and religious foundations (bonyads) to entrench itself as a monopolistic power across key economic sectors (Alfoneh, 2010). More recently, a Reuters investigation reported that the IRGC directly manages up to 50% of Iran's oil exports, especially to China, using shadow fleets and complex front networks to bypass sanctions (Reuters, 2024).

The cumulative effect of corruption, sanctions, and the IRGC's economic stranglehold has intensified hardship for ordinary Iranians while enriching regime insiders. Rising fuel prices, inflation, and systemic political repression have fueled repeated waves of public protest, strengthening calls for regime change.

5. CHALLENGES TO REZA PAHLAVI'S LEADERSHIP

5.1 Divisions Among Opposition Groups

One of the greatest obstacles to Reza Pahlavi's leadership is the fragmentation of Iran's opposition. While monarchists, republicans, ethnic activists, and reformist groups all oppose the clerical regime, they differ sharply on the political system that should replace it. Rivalries have often prevented the formation of a cohesive movement, with some groups rejecting monarchy altogether, while others view Pahlavi as the only figure with the legitimacy to unite diverse factions (Milani,

2022). Analysts argue that without a broad-based coalition, the opposition risks remaining divided and ineffective, a vulnerability the regime continues to exploit (Sadjadpour, 2023).

5.2 Skepticism from the Iranian Public

Despite his international visibility and diaspora support, Reza Pahlavi also faces skepticism inside Iran. Decades of state propaganda have portrayed the Pahlavi dynasty as corrupt and repressive, leaving many younger Iranians with limited knowledge of the modernization and social reforms of the pre-1979 era (Axworthy, 2016). In addition, segments of the public remain uncertain whether Pahlavi seeks a return to monarchy or a symbolic role within a democratic framework. While he has repeatedly emphasized that the future system should be decided by referendum, mistrust of external political figures—particularly those living in exile—remains a significant hurdle (Ganji, 2022).

5.3 International Relations and Sanctions

Another challenge lies in international dynamics and sanctions policy. Western governments have often been reluctant to openly back opposition figures in Iran, fearing regional instability and escalation with the regime (Katzman, 2023). At the same time, sanctions have weakened the Iranian economy but paradoxically strengthened the IRGC, which profits from smuggling networks and black-market control, while ordinary citizens suffer (Vaez, 2021). For Pahlavi, this presents a dilemma: while sanctions increase public resentment of the regime, they also entrench the ruling elite's economic power. International support for regime change remains cautious, with policymakers divided on whether exiled figures such as Reza Pahlavi can realistically mobilize change inside Iran.

These divisions, combined with skepticism and international caution, illustrate the steep road the crown prince faces in transforming symbolic legitimacy into practical leadership.

6. POTENTIAL PATHWAYS TO UNITY

6.1 Building a Coalition

For Reza Pahlavi to emerge as a unifying figure, the most critical step is the building of a broad coalition among opposition groups. Analysts emphasize that no single faction—monarchists, republicans, ethnic minorities, or reformists—can realistically topple the regime alone (Sadjadpour, 2023). By framing himself not as a monarch-in-waiting but as a facilitator of national dialogue, Reza Pahlavi could bring disparate movements together under the shared goal of a secular and democratic Iran (Milani, 2022). Reza Pahlavi's role in convening diaspora roundtables in Washington and European capitals since 2022 demonstrates his effort to create precisely such dialogue. These initiatives, though still fragile, illustrate his attempt to translate symbolic legitimacy into practical coalition-building across political divides. Comparative studies of regime transitions suggest that coalitions increase credibility, enhance international support, and weaken authoritarian resilience (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

6.2 Engaging with the Diaspora

Iran's diaspora, numbering between four and five million globally, represents a critical resource for political mobilization, financial support, and international advocacy (Khosravi, 2018). Reza Pahlavi has actively sought to engage with diaspora communities in North America and Europe, positioning them as both a bridge to global policymakers and as amplifiers of domestic protests through social media (Ganji, 2022). However, divisions within the diaspora mirror those inside Iran, with disagreements over monarchy, republicanism, and strategies for change. Building trust

across these divides remains essential to leveraging diaspora influence effectively (Axworthy, 2016).

6.3 Promoting Democratic Values

Central to Pahlavi's message is the promotion of democratic values as the foundation for Iran's future. He has repeatedly stressed the need for a national referendum to determine Iran's political system, assuring skeptics that he seeks not personal power but institutional reform (Pahlavi, 2020). Scholars argue that framing his leadership around democratic inclusivity—rather than dynastic restoration—could neutralize regime propaganda and attract broader support among younger Iranians, who prioritize freedom, equality, and social justice (Vaez, 2021). By combining Iran's cultural heritage with universal democratic principles, the crown prince positions himself as both a custodian of national pride and an advocate for modernization.

7. INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON REZA PAHLAVI

7.1 Western Support and Criticism

Western governments continue to tread carefully regarding Iran's opposition. Although Reza Pahlavi is the most visible exiled figure, leaders in Washington, London, and Paris have refrained from formally endorsing him, largely due to concerns about undermining domestic legitimacy and provoking escalation with Tehran (Katzman, 2023). U.S. officials engage with Iranian diaspora groups but avoid direct political support, mindful of the potential fallout from regime-change interventions like those in Iraq and Libya (Parsi, 2012).

Most recently, around mid-June 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated his stance against regime change by force. Speaking from the G7 summit, he warned that using military means to topple Iran's leadership would likely lead to chaos in the region, citing the destabilizing aftermath of Iraq and Libya as cautionary examples (Reuters, 2025; Politico, 2025). This sparked sharp criticism among Iranian activists and commentators, especially on X, who retorted with pointed irony: "When Air France flew Khomeini back from exile, why wasn't there talk of chaos?" – highlighting the perceived inconsistency in Western reactions to regime disruption.

Despite such caution, many Western think tanks and advocacy groups still view Reza Pahlavi's commitment to secular democracy as making him a credible alternative to the clerical regime (Sadjadpour, 2023). Critics, however, argue that his long exile and royal heritage may limit his appeal among younger Iranians inside the country (Ganji, 2022).

7.2 Regional Dynamics

Regional actors view Pahlavi through the lens of their own security interests. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have expressed tacit support for Iranian opposition movements, seeing them as potential counterweights to Tehran's regional expansionism (Wehrey, 2019). Israel has openly welcomed the idea of a democratic or secular Iran that could normalize relations and reduce security threats (Litvak, 2020). Conversely, Turkey and Qatar have maintained pragmatic ties with the Islamic Republic and are more skeptical of supporting exiled opposition leaders (Ulrichsen, 2020). For many regional governments, Reza Pahlavi's role is considered less a matter of ideology than of strategic alignment against or with Tehran's influence.

7.3 The Role of Global Powers

Global powers such as Russia and China view Reza Pahlavi's rise as a potential disruption to their current arrangements with the Islamic Republic, but neither country can be considered a faithful

strategic ally of Tehran. Russia, despite its visible military presence in Syria, intervened there in ways designed to safeguard its own bases and influence rather than to preserve Bashar al-Assad personally, underscoring Moscow's transactional approach (Trenin, 2020). Similarly, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, signed between Iran and Russia in December 2023, emphasized cooperation in energy and trade but explicitly stopped short of committing Moscow to defend Iran in case of attack (Iran International, 2023). This demonstrates that for Russia, national interests outweigh loyalty to Iran's regime.

China's relationship with Tehran is even more narrowly defined: Beijing has taken advantage of U.S. sanctions to purchase Iranian oil at steep discounts, providing the regime with revenue but offering little in return beyond trade (Reuters, 2024). China has avoided political or military commitments, signalling that its ties to Iran are opportunistic rather than strategic (Scobell, 2022).

By contrast, Western policymakers recognize that any transition in Iran—particularly one led by a democratic opposition figure such as Pahlavi—would reshape global energy markets, regional alliances, and nuclear diplomacy (Vaez, 2021). As a result, international support for the crown prince remains cautious, balanced between sympathy for Iran's opposition and the geopolitical calculations of major powers.

8. CASE STUDIES OF OTHER EXILED LEADERS

8.1 Success Stories

Some exiled leaders have successfully returned to guide their countries through political transformation. Charles II of England, after years of exile, was restored to the throne in 1660 and presided over a constitutional monarchy that stabilized the country (Hutton, 1989). In the modern era, Juan Carlos I of Spain played a decisive role in guiding Spain's transition from Franco's dictatorship to parliamentary democracy after 1975, earning legitimacy despite his royal background (Preston, 2004). Another important case is Nelson Mandela, who, though imprisoned rather than exiled, emerged from decades of isolation to lead South Africa into a democratic transition in the 1990s (Sampson, 2011). A further instructive case is Václav Havel, the dissident playwright who, after years of persecution and imprisonment, became President of Czechoslovakia in 1989. His moral authority and symbolic leadership provided credibility to the Velvet Revolution, underscoring how figures emerging from exile or repression can guide peaceful democratic transitions. Similarly, Gandhi's activism during his years in South Africa laid the groundwork for his later leadership of India's independence struggle, showing how exile can sharpen political strategy and broaden international legitimacy. These leaders succeeded because they combined symbolic legitimacy with broad-based coalition-building and a vision of political reform that resonated with their societies.

8.2 Failures and Lessons Learned

Not all exiled leaders succeed in reshaping their nations. In Iraq, exiled opposition figures promoted by the U.S. before the 2003 invasion—including Ahmed Chalabi—were seen as disconnected from the realities on the ground, and their lack of domestic legitimacy contributed to instability and mistrust after Saddam Hussein's fall (Dodge, 2013). Beyond disconnection from local realities, Ahmed Chalabi was also widely distrusted for his close ties to U.S. policymakers. His perceived dependency on foreign backing eroded his credibility among Iraqis, serving as a warning for exiled leaders like Pahlavi: excessive reliance on outside support can undermine domestic legitimacy. In Libya, post-2011 exiled figures failed to unite the fragmented opposition, fueling prolonged conflict and civil war (Pack, 2019). Similarly, the case of Mohammad Mossadegh's supporters after

the 1953 coup illustrates how external interference and the absence of a cohesive domestic base can doom efforts to restore exiled or displaced leaders (Kinzer, 2008).

The lesson is clear: exile does not automatically translate into legitimacy. Success requires not only symbolic or dynastic authority but also domestic resonance, coalition-building, and the ability to present a credible and inclusive democratic vision. For Reza Pahlavi, these cases underscore the dual challenge and opportunity: he possesses symbolic legitimacy and international visibility, but must overcome the pitfalls of exile politics by demonstrating inclusivity, credibility, and direct connection with the Iranian people.

9. FUTURE OF IRAN: SCENARIOS AND PREDICTIONS

9.1 Best-Case Scenarios

The best-case outcome for Iran involves a peaceful transition to a secular democratic system, potentially under a constitutional monarchy framework where Reza Pahlavi plays a symbolic but unifying role. Analysts argue that such a system could restore international legitimacy, end crippling sanctions, and integrate Iran back into global markets (Milani, 2022). This scenario would likely produce economic stabilization, reengagement with Europe and the United States, and improved relations with regional neighbours such as Saudi Arabia and Israel (Sadjadpour, 2023). Historical precedents, such as Spain's democratic transition under King Juan Carlos I, suggest that monarchic symbolism can provide continuity while enabling democratization (Preston, 2004).

9.2 Worst-Case Scenarios

At the other extreme, Iran risks sliding into greater authoritarianism and fragmentation. Should the clerical regime survive current legitimacy crises, it may deepen repression and further militarize politics under the Revolutionary Guard's dominance (Vaez, 2021). Continued sanctions and economic mismanagement could fuel social unrest, but without a credible alternative leadership, protests may descend into chaos or civil war (Ganji, 2022). Another danger is regional destabilization: an embattled regime could escalate proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, amplifying insecurity across the Middle East (Katzman, 2023). This scenario risks replicating the collapse seen in Libya or prolonged instability similar to Syria's civil conflict (Pack, 2019).

9.3 Middle Ground Possibilities

Between these extremes lies a prolonged transition scenario: Iran experiences gradual liberalization under pressure from civil society and diaspora influence but without immediate regime collapse. In this pathway, Reza Pahlavi and other opposition figures play an advocacy role while domestic actors cautiously push reforms (Axworthy, 2016). The Islamic Republic may concede limited reforms—loosening morality policing, permitting more political participation—while retaining clerical supremacy. This “hybrid regime” outcome resembles models of competitive authoritarianism observed in other states, where meaningful change occurs incrementally rather than through abrupt revolution (Levitsky & Way, 2010). While less transformative than the best-case scenario, it still opens avenues for eventual democratization if opposition forces can maintain momentum.

10. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Iran's political future hinges on the interplay between historical legacies, domestic resistance, and international dynamics. This study has shown that Reza Pahlavi represents the most visible and symbolically legitimate figure capable of uniting a deeply fractured opposition. His advocacy for a secular, democratic Iran that preserves national pride while integrating with the

global community distinguishes him from both the ruling clerical elite and other fragmented exile movements (Milani, 2022; Sadjadpour, 2023).

The record of Iran's modern history is clear: the Pahlavi era marked a period of rapid modernization, women's rights expansion, and global recognition, while the Islamic Republic has presided over regression, repression, and international isolation. Successive uprisings in 1999, 2009, 2019, and 2022 reflect not only popular discontent but also a persistent yearning for systemic change (Ganji, 2022). The endurance of these protests—despite brutal repression—underscores the resilience of Iranian society and the possibility of future transformation.

International caution remains a significant obstacle. As Macron's recent remarks demonstrate, Western leaders fear that regime change could create chaos in the Middle East (France 24, 2022; Reuters, 2025). Yet such concerns overlook the fact that much of the region's instability is already orchestrated by the Islamic Republic through its proxy militias and expansionist policies. Russia and China, often portrayed as Tehran's partners, are revealed to be transactional actors: Moscow prioritizes its own interests, as seen in the 2023 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, while Beijing seeks only discounted oil (Iran International, 2023; Reuters, 2024). Neither is a reliable strategic ally for the regime.

Looking ahead, three pathways emerge. The best-case scenario envisions a peaceful transition to a democratic and inclusive system, with the crown prince playing a unifying role that echoes Spain's post-Franco transition. The worst-case outcome would see deepened authoritarianism, economic collapse, and regional destabilization. The middle-ground scenario involves gradual reform, but history suggests such "managed change" under authoritarian systems often delays rather than prevents collapse (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Ultimately, the decisive factor is whether Iranians inside and outside the country can overcome fragmentation and rally behind a shared vision. Reza Pahlavi, with his dynastic legitimacy, consistent advocacy for democracy, and ability to bridge the diaspora with domestic resistance, remains uniquely positioned to embody this vision. His leadership does not guarantee success, but without a unifying figure of his stature, Iran risks remaining trapped in cycles of repression and upheaval. The conclusion is unavoidable: if Iran is to move from exile to renewal, Pahlavi's role will be central to any credible path toward unity, freedom, and stability. The lessons from other exiled leaders reinforce this conclusion: those who succeeded—such as Havel, Mandela, or Juan Carlos—did so by combining symbolic legitimacy with coalition-building and a democratic vision rooted in their nation's realities. By contrast, failures like Chalabi show the dangers of disconnection or overreliance on external patrons. For the crown prince, these examples frame both the opportunities and the pitfalls of his historic moment.

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